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ABSTRACT

The mythic structure of the popular television melodrama, "Dallas," may be analyzed in order to shed light on the reasons underlying the program's wide appeal. First of all, "Dallas" combines the conventions of the crime formula in such a way as to create a new mythology of crime for television, one similar to that found in the movie, "The Godfather." Furthermore, the similarity between "Dallas" and "The Godfather" is connected to the disparate roles of the organization and the family, while the difference between the two dramas is connected to the type of crime committed--white collar crime in "Dallas" and gangland crime in "The Godfather." Finally, the overarching formula of "Dallas," melodrama, allows the audience to approach the edge of the abyss and to experience the tension between what happens on the surface and what is going on beneath surface realities. (FL)

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Dallas: The Mythology of Crime and the Moral Occult

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Cultural formulas like the Western, the melodrama, the detective and the crime story change over time to reflect a society's hidden beliefs, values, misgivings and struggles.[1] As such they provide invaluable clues as to the convictions and attitudes of a large section of the national community. With the advent of broadcasting in the 1920's, radio and then television became an important medium for episodic, formula-bound drama. To be successful, a television program must repeat a familiar, easily recognized formula and also add something new; it must satisfy the viewer's need for order and security and at the same time lead the audience to the brink of the abyss, where it may experience the delights of risk, danger, confusion and, above all, ambiguity. The television show Dallas, almost from the beginning, captured the imagination and interest not only of the majority of Americans but also of many television audiences abroad.

It is the purpose of this essay to examine Dallas: to study the mythic structure of the drama and to attempt to come to some understanding of the underlying reasons for its appeal. Two theses form the argument of the following analysis. The first is that Dallas combines conventions of the crime formula in such a way that a new mythology of crime emerges, one very similar to that of The Godfather. The similarity between Dallas and The Godfather is connected to the role of the organization and the family, central to both dramas. The difference between the two dramas is connected to the kind crime: in Dallas, the type of crime committed by J.R. and others is a kind white-collar crime, whereas in The Godfather the crime is that of the gangster.

The second thesis of this argument is that Dallas's overarching formula, melodrama, allows the audience to approach the edge of the abyss, to experience the delicious tension between what is real and what is

unreal, to explore the delights of the ambiguous. Dallas does not so much provide an easy answer about the world outside our windows, i.e., that behind all of the apparent chaos there is safety and order. Rather, Dallas explores the beliefs, the struggles, the misgivings of our world and in that exploration relieves "the anxieties of those who share in the cultural activity--the audience."[2] More importantly, however, besides being about the world outside our windows, Dallas explores the inner world, what one insightful critic calls the moral occult. In this examination of the darkness deep within, Dallas speaks to the struggles of contemporary generations as they try to come to terms with the discrepancy between the myths they were brought up on and the work-a-day realities with which they must cope.

Dallas and the Mythology of Crime

Although the overarching formula in Dallas is melodrama, the TV show reflects some conventions of crime drama. Like other crime stories, the basis of Dallas is the lives of the characters during and after crimes have been committed, e.g., the shooting of J.R., the murder of Kristen, the sinking of the oil tanker, the overthrow of a foreign government. Like other crime stories, the puzzle value, "who did it," is sometimes very high, such as when J.R. was shot; at other times it is nonexistent, such as when Ewing oil fields were blown up. The setting is Southfork and the inner offices of the oil corporation, both of which provide the viewer with an idea of the pressures involved in a particular way of life. Unlike detective shows, e.g., Kojak, Columbo, or the more recent Strike Force in which the plot and clue requirements take over as the setting fades, the Dallas setting is integral to the story. Finally,

whereas the social attitude at the heart of a detective show is conservative, a crime story expresses a departure from the traditional esteem for law and order and the way a society is run. Dallas follows suit: the implicit suggestion of the show is that in a society, like ours, where most people are prisoners of the organization, in this case the oil corporations, the shady character is the admired character of the story. J.R. is the man everyone loves to hate, but at the same time he is free in spirit and will knuckle down to no one. For this he is admired.[3]

In the seventies, a new direction in the mythology of crime emerged with the novel and the movie The Godfather. As Cawelti points out, this film indicated how contemporary Americans defined crime and understood how crime relates to other aspects of our culture.[4] In Adventure, Mystery and Romance, Cawelti suggests that if TV producers could figure out a way to do it, they would come up with a spin off of the hit movie -- something like a series entitled "One Don's Family." The argument here is that Dallas is indeed the television version of The Godfather. In both the movie and the television series, the use of the central symbol of the family is the unifying principle of the ongoing drama. In both, the drama centers on the rise of the true son and heir. In the movie, Michael Corleone was the one who understood his father's character and destiny and the one who, giving up his youthful ideas, allowed himself to be shaped by the Godfather's vision of the world. The Dallas counterpart to Michael Corleone is J.R., since it is he who understands power. However, Bobby Ewing resembles the character of Michael also in the sense that as the decent younger son of Jock, he was thrust into a position of power in the second season of the series; when J.R. was shot Bobby became

the head of the corporation. During his brief tenure in the seat legitimately held by J.R., Bobby came to understand and enjoy the secrets of power and ruthlessness. The writers of the show were able to perform a convincing juggling act to the extent that, for a while at least, it looked like Bobby Ewing would become another J.R. More recently the death of Jock made it possible again for Bobby to take over as president of the company when J.R. began to lose a grip on himself. The bottom line, however, is that Bobby is not what ruthless oil corporation executives are made of and that was made clear in the scene where Jock tells him that power is not something you are given, it is something you take.

Other similarities exist between the movie and the television series. In both the main characters are members of the family. The key points in the unfolding drama concern the history of the family: the marriage of the daughter, the rise of a second generation to take the place of the patriarch, the importance of carrying on the seed, threats to the life of the son. In both the film and the TV series, the mafia and J.R. are portrayed as the equivalent of God: "one who sees all, hears all, and forgives nothing."[5]

According to Cawelti, The Godfather, and by extension, Dallas, represents a new element in criminal mythology: the fascination of America with the organization and its power. The Godfather formula entertains the mixture of horror and fascination with the criminal present in previous versions of the myth. However the kind of crime has changed. The proposition at the heart of the new formula is no longer "Crime does not pay." Instead Dallas and related dramas permit the public to enjoy the fantasy of membership in an organization which exercises boundless power and at the same time a true concern for the members of its family.

Crime, then, is more a function of social context than it is a function of individual morality. More importantly, previous versions of the formula expressed a reaffirmation of conventional morality. While Dallas does affirm the immorality of crime, the affirmation of conventional morality and societal values is relatively shaky. The dark message behind the popularity of the show may be that the public believes America is a society of criminals, that success is possible only through cunning and corruption, and that members of contemporary society who partake in violence and corruption are interesting and even admirable.

Like all formula art, Dallas serves as an ambiguous representation of current social values in America: overtly it reflects the principles of morality and order; covertly it reflects the hidden resentments and animosities felt in the deep recesses of the heart. Interestingly enough, contrary to the father-elimination fantasy at the center of the Horatio Alger stories of the last century, in Dallas the father enjoys the esteem and love of the family members. Instead, what seems to be at work is the secret drive toward sibling elimination. Similarly, beneath the surface of the hard-boiled detective was the resentment against "respectable society." Beneath the surface of Dallas is the resentment the public holds against the power of the organization: the corporation, or the government, or, what is more likely, both.

Cawelti's thesis is that the new version of the myth mirrors a world in which the myth of individualism no longer explains the ordering of society for most members of the public. However, whereas Cawelti identifies the seventies as the turning point, I am more inclined to place the turning point much earlier: during and immediately after World War II.

The war had made it clear that the bureaucratic organization, the working together of teams, the collective effort of the technically skilled -- these alone could ensure ultimate victory. The widespread acceptance and general experience (ideally, at least) of a smoothly run bureaucratic machine, gave birth to a new notion of how to preserve order in society. This new belief found its way into popular art, such that a very subtle change in focus from the enterprise of a Sam Spade, the lone agent, to the collective activity of state and federal employees took place.[6]

Since 1945 in fiction and radio-television drama, the detective has been a policeman who operated within an institution. Dragnet comes immediately to mind: its hero, Sgt. Friday, fought crime with the help of fellow police officers and their latest and most sophisticated technology.[7] This trend suggests that in today's culture it is the work of the organization, not the individual, which counts.

With this in mind, what is central to the impact of Dallas on the popular imagination is the apparent contradiction between the success of ruthless corporate room tactics and values, usually at the hands of J.R., and the human values of family life. The potential resolution of this central contradiction may be the recognition that evil is not dependent on the individual. Most adult men and women in the U.S. inherited a moral order from their parents in which the grit and resolution of the individual, the honor and decency of each person, counted. In the last twenty-five years, this inherited moral order clashed head-on with several devastating events -- the assassinations of the sixties, the war in Viet Nam and Watergate. What the popularity of Dallas indicates is that most members of the society no longer believe that the individual, if he is

clever or works hard enough, will succeed. Rather, the focus of attention is the collective; the organization rather than the individual is the seat of moral responsibility. To examine the realm of the moral, we need to turn to melodrama, the overarching formula of the show.

Melodrama and the Moral Occult

Originally melodrama referred to a story accompanied by music. In eighteenth-century pantomime, the esthetic of melodrama was justified by Diderot, whose use of tableaux revolutionized the theatre. In the tableau, he sought to represent the postures and positions of various characters in their most exaggerated forms in order to capture clearly in visual form the interrelations and emotions of those represented on stage. In a world without the lightbulb, positions and gestures of actors in a drama may go unnoticed if they are not exaggerated. On stages illuminated by candles or gaslight, the means for conveying delicate shades of feeling was primarily oral -- in the form of asides thrust across the footlights. Thus new lighting equipment brought about changes in melodrama. Although heightened emotion remained a staple in the form, the ability to use and control the use of lighting gave the playwright a greater range of possibilities regarding character portrayal.[8] The lightbulb is significant because its arrival illustrates the origins of exaggeration in a currently maligned genre. In all melodrama, heightened emotion and exaggerated gestures or, in the case of television, extended camera play on facial expressions represent the invisible life, the subterranean river of experience.

It is of central importance to understand the function of exaggeration in a melodrama like Dallas. David Thornburn puts the matter

succinctly and with insight: the conventions of character and plot should be viewed as rules of the genre in the same way that the iambic pentameter is a rule for a particular type of poetry. ". . .[T]hese recurring features of melodrama can be perceived as the enabling conditions for an encounter with forbidden or deeply disturbing materials: not an escape into blindness or easy reassurance, but an instrument for seeing [italics added]."[9] Dallas, to be understood correctly, must be analyzed as a vehicle by which the public approaches the precipice and examines the moral abyss, or what one insightful critic calls "the moral occult."[10] At the heart of Dallas is the state of being beyond the context of the story; it is a state of being related to the story, certainly, but supercharged and in excess of it. The world portrayed in Dallas, the world of the family and the oil cartel, is charged with moral ambiguities, "mysteries to be cleared up on the process of storytelling."[11]

Through overdetermined facial expressions and the exchange of heightened dialogue, Dallas suggests that beneath the gestures of social reality, the problems of family life or the crises of the oil industry, lies hidden a state of moral being which may be unspeakable. It is this moral occult or darkness which represents the real world Dallas portrays and is all about: a "world where there is no clear system of sacred myth, no unity of belief, no accepted metaphysical chain leading from the phenomenal to the spiritual, only a fragmented society and fragments of myths."[12]

Dallas, then, appeals vividly to the contemporary imagination, regardless of age, education or upbringing, because it insists that mystery and ambiguity of life lived out at the work-a-day level cannot be accounted for by the myths we were brought up on. The popularity of Dallas suggests

that the sacred history of democracy, which so often defines the imaginative horizons of the young, no longer has the appeal of yesteryear. It no longer explains the kind of reality experienced by the majority of the television audience. Instead, Dallas puts us in contact with the struggle between good and evil, perdition and redemption, and the success and failure we sense constitutes the subterranean river of our collective lives. J.R. Ewing best embodies this moral occult since it is he who articulates the hidden spiritual values which are masked most of the time by the surface reality portrayed in each episode. This moral occult does not represent some metaphysical system of understanding, a philosophical or theological order of reality. Rather, as Brooks suggests, it represents what Freud would call the unconscious: the realm of existence which is within us but which is usually closed off from us; it is that seemingly impenetrable darkness we tremble to examine in the cold light of day. Dallas exposes this realm of being.

To illustrate this idea -- the surface story versus the subterranean story -- let's examine the character of Sue Ellen. On the surface her problem seems to be the power J.R. holds over her by reason of his ability to find out everything about her and then see to it that she cannot leave him, retain custody of the child, or find happiness with anyone else, e.g., Cliff or Dusty. In reality, Sue Ellen's destiny and the choices she can make in her life have little to do with these surface realities, i.e., her place in a patriarchal world. Her inability to achieve inner peace has much more to do with the intense drama in which she must take command of her own destiny and purge her consciousness of overwhelming fears. This point -- that Sue Ellen's problem is Sue Ellen, not J.R. -- is borne out in recent episodes in which she is free of J.R. but still in turmoil.

Likewise, on the surface Dallas -- and other melodramas -- appears simple-minded, in part because it relies on well-defined stereotypes and somewhat predictable conventions of plot. The heightened emotion and exaggerated mannerisms render a world in which representation or verisimilitude is lacking. Yet it is this very quality which allows us to enter not so much the domain of reality as the domain of truth. Dallas is an intensely interesting portrayal of the void; it depends for understanding upon a visionary leap. The camera as it lingers on the face of J.R., in his attempt to come to an understanding and acceptance of his father's death or of Sue Ellen as she struggles to free herself of her entanglement with J.R., allows the viewer to enter a world in which the gestures and fasial expressions of the portrayed world act as metaphors referring us to the invisible world: the realm of the moral. As Peter Brooks so eloquently points out, for the melodramatic imagination, things and gestures are never simply themselves; they refer to something else. Thus, what on the surface appears to be a simplistic, facile picture of the family and the oil cartel, upon closer examination is a complex and ambiguous statement about the dark, subterranean world of experience.

The episode recounting the relationship of various characters to Jock provides an illustrative example. In the scene in which Jock admonishes his youngest son about power, the camera focuses on the face of Bobby. The inner turmoil and fear Bobby has regarding his own ability to do what is necessary to direct the corporation successfully is clearly reflected in his facial expression. At that point, the world Dallas really portrayed was the world of despair and fear many experience concerning their abilities to cope in the super-charged world of the organization or to "make it" on Wall Street. This fear of being a loser

is also central to the motivation of Cliff Barnes, Bobby's brother-in-law and alter ego.

Besides its apparent superficiality, Dallas and other melodramas are viewed by scholars, with some justification, as a degenerate form of the tragic, "a form of the tragic in which the world no longer holds the tenable idea of the sacred."[13] Dallas, it is true, does not achieve the level of art of a Hamlet, yet it does successfully speak to the central darkness, the inexpressible abyss at the center of what it means to be human. It is because the moral realm it bespeaks is not visible that the exaggerated and hyperbolic are essential to melodrama. The writers of Dallas successfully portray a void in which meanings and conflicts are uncertain and hidden from the investigation of the world at large. The social realities portrayed by the various characters in Dallas imply certain moral states of being which confuse the forces of light and darkness. This confusion of moral realms, I believe, is at the heart of the show's ability to capture the imagination of the viewing audience.

With respect to this last point, the writers of Dallas have been fairly successful in presenting characters who are capable of being both good and villainous. J.R. stands at one end of the good-evil continuum and such characters as Pamela and Bobby stand at the other. In most cases each character switches hats upon occasion. Sue Ellen, especially, changes roles as circumstances call for a change. In many episodes she clearly plays the victim, e.g., when she was charged for the shooting of J.R. In those episodes even good-hearted Miss Ellie seemed capable of a remarkable hardness of heart regarding her daughter-in-law. Sue Ellen, however, is also capable of treachery and cunning, especially when it appeared that Bobby and Pamela would give birth to the son and heir to the family

fortune, or when Bobby threatened to supercede J.R. as corporation president. Likewise, Cliff Barnes, the honest, hard-working, down-on-his-luck politician and executive, cannot seem to win against the Ewings. As J.R. puts it, he is a loser. Yet, when J.R. needed an extension on a multi-million dollar loan, Cliff assumed the role of the villain and threatenedin the manner of a nineteenth-century landlord, to foreclose on the deal and bring the Ewings to their collective knees.

By giving the audience characters which evidence changes of feeling, attitudes and behaviors, Dallas does not impose upon the viewer a single authoritative version of reality.[14] It does not, for example, portray the law-and-order world of Strike Force. This technique suggests that human beings do not control everything in their work-a-day worlds. Instead they respond, sometimes weakly, to the random experiences of their existence. Furthermore, it is only in the collective, the corporation or the family, that the individual survives. To quote Miss Ellie in a recent episode, "The family should pull together when there's trouble."

Conclusion

In effect Dallas combines the conventions of crime drama and melodrama. The world of crime portrayed is a new version of the myth of criminality. A new kind of crime is at the heart of the show: white collar crime carried on within the safe conclaves of the organization. The drama can claim a special insight into the workings of the cartel and the struggles involved in living a particular kind of life. In order to graphically portray those struggles, exaggerated emotion and facial expression are central to enabling the members of the viewing audience to take the leap from the surface portrayal to the world which

lies below the surface: the fears and anxieties which make up the subterranean experience of our collective lives. In its ability to resolve the tension, even if only temporarily, between the accepted values of family life and the ruthless, cunning and deadly tactics of the organization, Dallas has spoken effectively to the viewing audience.

NOTES

[1]See John G. Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture (Chicago, 1976), Chaps. 1 and 2; Colin Watson, Snobbery with Violence: Crime Stories and Their Audience (New York, 1971, "Introduction" especially; for a somewhat different approach, cf. Stephen Knight, Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction (London, 1980). Although several "classic" studies regarding the crime story and melodrama were consulted in the process of doing research for this paper, only those works cited appear here. Such "classics" include Frank Chandler's The Literature of Roguery, 2 vols. (Boston, 1907); Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor, A Catalogue of Crime (New York, 1971); Michael Booth, English Melodrama (London, 1965); and David Grimstead, Melodrama Unveiled (Chicago, 1968).

[2]Here I am drawing on Julian Symans, Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History (London, 1972), 173-78.

[3]Ibid.

[4]In the following analysis of the Godfather formula I am drawing on Cawelti, Adventure, 51-79.

[5]Ovid Demaris, The Overlord (New York, 1972), 281; cf. Mario Puzo, The Godfather (New York, 1970), 146.

[6]Knight, Form, 168-69.

[7]Ibid., 168.

[8]Frank Rahill places the coming of age of melodrama in the United States after the new lighting techniques were utilized; see The World of Melodrama (University Park and London, 1967), 268ff.

[9]David Thornburn, "Television Melodrama," Television: The Critical View, ed. by Horace Newcomb (New York, 1979), 539. Thornburn's article originally appeared in Television as a Cultural Form, ed. by Douglass Carter and Richard Adler (New York, 1976).

[10]Peter Brooks, "The Melodramatic Imagination; The Example of Balzac and James," Romanticism: Vistas, Instances and Continuities, ed. by David Thornburn and Geoffrey Hartman (Ithaca and London, 1973), 198-220. See also Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination (New Haven and London, 1976); several related articles in Melodrama, ed. by Daniel Gerould (New York, 1980); and Earl F. Bargainier, "Melodrama as Formula," Journal of Culture 9 (Winter 1975), 726-33.

[11]Brooks, "Melodramatic," 212. In the following analysis I draw on Brook's arguments.

[12]Ibid., 216ff.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Here I am drawing on Knight, Form, 24-28.